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Particularly Violent? The Construction of Muslim Culture as a Risk Factor for Domestic Violence

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> In 2007 a 24-year-old, highly educated woman of Turkish descent, born and raised in the Netherlands, married a Turkish young man from her parents' native village. Her parents had arranged for her to meet him while visiting Turkey so she could make her own choice. She liked him and agreed to marry him. After the wedding, the husband moved to live with his wife in the Netherlands. She was the wage earner. The husband had no job and hardly spoke any Dutch and was in a dependent position. He became violent and abusive towards his wife. When the wife wanted to divorce, her family convinced her to return and try again. She did. Soon the violence resumed. She then convinced her parents that a separation was necessary and they took her in. While the application for the divorce was pending, the young woman was shot by her husband on the way to work while waiting for her train. The husband was arrested. The woman died on the train platform.

This tragic event was extensively portrayed in the Dutch media as a culturally motivated murder (see *Noord Hollands Dagblad* 25 June, 2007; *NRC* 24 May, 2008). The fact that both victim and perpetrator were Turkish and Muslim and that they had been introduced to each other as potential marriage candidates, led to a construction of a narrative in which the victim had been 'forced' to marry, and the perpetrator's motive was 'honour-related'. This reconstruction of both the killing and the couple's marital history is illustrative of the culturalist discourse on violence against women (VAW) among Muslim minorities that is currently evolving in a multi-cultural society that is facing increasingly discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims. Stereotypical images of 'culturally' based violence are growing in popularity and contribute to the discursive construction of Muslim minorities as *particularly* violent, especially towards women, and notably as *more* violent than the native Dutch. This paper critically addresses how this tendency is playing out in Dutch research.

There is a growing concern about violent *public* crime (robbery, burglary, assault) by young males from minority migrant communities, not only in the

Netherlands. It reflects a complex problem where discrimination and social isolation play a role (FRA 2010). Against a backdrop of intensifying discrimination of Muslims in general across Europe (FRA 2009), and ongoing negative stereotyping of Muslim communities, the discrimination reflects a clear gendered dynamic. Muslim women have become the subject of particular concern in categorizing all Muslim women representing the ultimate victims of women's oppression and notably domestic violence as typical for the Muslim community (Roggeband & Verloo 2007). In the Netherlands, the Turkish and Moroccan communities, predominantly Muslim, are the focal subjects of this discourse. Although they constitute a minority of 4.3% (Garssen and Van Duin 2009)[1] they have become emblematic of a wider anti-migration and anti-Muslim/anti- Islam discourse that is evolving, also across Europe (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006; Fundamental Rights Agency 2009; 2010).

Globalization and migration imply a confrontation with forms of VAW that most European societies are less familiar with, like forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and so-called honor-related violence. It is not surprising that such manifestations of violence can be interpreted as the emblematic examples of the violent and oppressive characteristics of some migrant communities, leading to a representation of both perpetrators and victims as the 'other', as 'them', who are unlike 'us' in Western cultures (Okin 1999). In this chapter, we will present the Netherlands as a case study for this kind of rhetorical dynamic. We focus, however, on the most common forms of violence that is not culturally specific: domestic violence and spouse killing. Despite its cross-cultural nature we will point out how a discursive construction of the cultural specificity still takes place when these forms of violence occur within ethnic minorities. From a post-colonial and feminist theoretical perspective, we argue that this rhetorical othering, illustrates that multicultural Europe faces a profound challenge: how to acknowledge the epidemic prevalence of VAW in its midst, notably domestic violence against women, and avoid the trap of an ethnocentric rhetoric in which VAW is used

1 The Netherlands has 16.5 million inhabitants, of which migrants constitute 18%. Over half of them (10%) are non-Western migrants. The category migrant includes individuals born outside the Netherlands (first generation) or who have at least one non-Dutch parent (second generation). In this chapter, we focus on the two largest non-European migrant communities: Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants (who moved to the Netherlands from the early 1970s onwards) who together constitute 4.3% of the population. This figure does not fully cover the proportion of people who would identify themselves culturally speaking as (partially or predominantly) Turkish or Moroccan. Since the figure is based on a demographic census-based definition, not on a social-cultural definition, it excludes the third generation, born and educated in the Netherlands (therefore technically not migrants), yet raised in a social and cultural context that is marked by the culture of origin of the first generation.

as a device to position 'the west' (the 'old' Europe) hegemonically against 'the rest', the 'new' Europe (Mohanty 1991; 2004).

First we address the empirical question, whether cultural minorities, mainly the Turkish and Moroccan communities, differ from the native Dutch population in relation to the prevalence of intimate partner violence and spouse killing. Then we reflect on how Dutch research contributed to a selective construction of cultural difference. Finally, we contextualize this discursive shift within two wider concurring trends: a growing anti-migration rhetoric in the Netherlands and an increasing trend towards portraying domestic violence among the native Dutch as a gender neutral phenomenon, affecting men and women alike and not structurally related to any form of inequality or discrimination between men and women.

A brief note on terminology: The first generation of Turks and Moroccans (mostly male) were labour migrants (migrating in the late 1960s, early 1970s). The subsequent generations migrated in the context of family reunion and/or marriages or were born in the Netherlands. From a cultural-religious perspective (the Netherlands is predominantly Judeo-Christian), religion (Islam) is considered to be one of the distinguishing cultural and religious characteristics of both migrant communities, even though there are marked differences in religious identification within the communities. To capture the complexity of markers that can define group membership, we use the terms cultural and migrant minority interchangeably in this chapter. Where relevant, reference will be made to more specific defining characteristics.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) among minorities in the Netherlands: empirical data

Prevalence of IPV and the role of gender among native Dutch

In 1989, the results of the first Dutch in-depth national survey on the prevalence, nature, dynamics, social background, and consequences of domestic violence and marital rape of women were published. At that point, the limited population size of migrant communities in the Netherlands made it virtually impossible to include them in sufficient numbers in a representative population survey. This limitation was explicitly addressed when the first results were published (Römkens 1989; 1992; 1997). Results indicated that at least 21% of all Dutch women had experienced unilateral physical violence from a male partner (for almost half of them that also included rape), over 5% had been involved in mutual violence (both partners initiating and using physical

violence with comparable frequency and severity) and another 3% reported having been raped without additional physical abuse.

The question of whether prevalence rates among migrant (Muslim) women were higher was a non-issue in the 1980s. The high prevalence data among native Dutch women were taken as an indication of the pervasiveness of the problem generally. As far as migrant women as victims of domestic violence were concerned, the focus was on improving support and interventions, training professionals to enhance their understanding of specific issues in migrant communities (Deug 1990; De Lima 1994). The assumption was that although the norms and values justifying gendered violence against women might differ across cultures, the prevalence or severity of the violence did not.[2] Domestic violence was considered a gendered problem that affects women equally regardless of class or race/ethnicity.

Towards the late 1990s, two related changes took place: 'wife abuse' was discursively gender neutralized on the one hand and culturalized on the other. In public, and notably Dutch policy discourse, the then common terminology of 'wife abuse' and 'marital rape' was replaced by the generic term *huiselijk geweld (*domestic violence, in *German: haüslicher Gewalt,*). The violence was increasingly analysed as a gender-neutral phenomenon, at least as far as Dutch native women were concerned. Crucial in this tendency was a second population survey on 'family domestic violence', conducted in 1997 at the request of the Justice Department, through a brief gender-neutral questionnaire. Cultural minorities were not included, again for statistical and demographic reasons. Findings on male and female victimization by an (ex-) partner were hardly segregated. The emphasis was on generic prevalence data on any kind of 'domestic violence' (lumping together partner violence, physical and sexual child abuse and elder abuse) which was reported by 43% of the respondents. For the first time the gender neutrality of the phenomenon was suggested. Intimate partner violence was presented as a gender-neutral phenomenon that affected both men and women, although it was mentioned that men's violence was somewhat more severe (Van Dijk et al. 1997; 1998).[3] The question how these results relate to the outcome of the first Dutch survey, underlining the gender-specific nature of domestic violence against women, remained unaddressed. Only secondary analysis, published

2 Dutch training and development institutes like Movisie (formerly Trans Act), mostly government-funded, play a pivotal role in the education and training of professionals, see <http://www.movisie.nl>.

3 Note that this survey met with severe methodological criticism (both re. the gender neutrality of its concepts and the width of operationalisations, resulting in prevalence figures with a limited validity as partner violence and childhood victimization were difficult to segregate). The study concluded that men and women were equally at risk of experiencing 'any form' of violence from a partner.

much later (2005), revealed that there actually was a substantial gender difference, indicating a lifetime over-all prevalence for both physical victimization and sexual abuse (as a child by parents, family members, and/or abuse by an ex-partner) for 16% of women and 7% of men (Wittebrood and Veldheer 2005).

Prevalence of IPV and the role of culture among minorities

Concurring with the starting gender neutralization of domestic violence during the late 1990s, there was an unrelated yet growing tendency in the Netherlands to position cultural minorities as a problem (Entzinger 2003). This then translated in the recurring question, both in the media and in political and policy debates, of whether the prevalence and severity of domestic violence among cultural minorities actually differed from the native Dutch (Roggeband and Verloo 2007). In the early 2000s, the Dutch Department of Justice commissioned a replication of the 1997 family violence survey, this time specifically focusing on minority groups. Ignoring the major methodological concerns that had been voiced about the gender biases in the 1997 survey, the same instrument was used, since it would allow a comparison of results, despite its bias. No attention was given to gender or culturally relevant questions in the questionnaire. Only interviewers from the ethnic communities were selected to conduct the face-to-face interviews.

Results regarding prevalence of 'domestic violence' (again adding up physical/sexual child abuse, psychological abuse, and intimate partner violence) turned out to be substantially *lower* for Moroccans and Turks (14% and 21%) compared to the native Dutch in the earlier survey (43%). The severity of intimate partner violence was comparable to that suffered by Dutch victims (Van Dijk et al. 2002: 28). The authors went to great lengths to explain why the prevalence data on domestic violence among ethnic minorities suffered from severe underreporting. It is safe to accept that underreporting affected these data, as it affects any study on domestic violence. What is striking is that the underreporting received selective attention: only in the study of ethnic minorities (Van Dijk et al. 2002: 61). The results of the 1997 survey among native Dutch respondents were actually presented, arguing that they were hardly affected by underreporting (Van Dijk et al. 1998).[4] It is noteworthy that the results of the 2002 prevalence study among ethnic minorities are rarely referred to in Dutch policy papers

4 However, only 3% of the respondents in the migrant study mentioned 'shame' as a reason to not disclose violence, in comparison with 18% of the native Dutch respondents.

on domestic violence. Since results were immediately presented in the context of presumed unreliability, the ongoing assumption was implicitly revealed: ethnic minorities, notably Muslims, are more violent than the native Dutch.

The growing numbers of minority women seeking help (either from the police or in shelters) have often been used to support this assumption,[5] despite the fact that the number of women seeking help can hardly be a reliable indicator of prevalence. Furthermore, the overrepresentation of minority women in shelters for domestic violence victims is an indicator of the relative lack of social resources, which severely limits migrant women's alternatives in their own social networks when in need of temporary accommodation or support. Research in the 1980s showed that, before native Dutch women turn to a shelter, virtually all had first stayed with relatives or friends, up to five times or more (Römkens 1989). Most migrants not only face relatively poor housing conditions, but have few or no relatives to turn to. High levels of social control within some migrant communities easily lead to loyalty conflicts if women seek help.

The limited qualitative Dutch studies in this area indicate that it is the social and cultural contexts in which the violence occurs that merits more attention (Wolf 2006). It is the relational dynamics and justifications for domestic violence that are particularly bound to cultural values. In-depth research among abusive Turkish and Moroccan migrants in the Netherlands revealed that, in the context of migration, traditional patriarchal gender roles that are dominant in the community of origin are under pressure. The exposure of Turkish and Moroccan women to a relatively liberal social climate is perceived by many male family members, notably husbands, as potentially weakening their dominance. For some, this results in justifying violence in culturally specific terms: feelings of loss of control over wives and daughters are perceived as a loss of masculinity and subsequently the loss of a valued social identity in their community. The researchers emphasize that (Islamic) religion is hardly ever invoked as a justification for violence by Turkish or Moroccan perpetrators (Yerden 2008).

5 Muslim migrant women, mostly coming from Turkey and Morocco, constitute about 50 to 60% of the shelter population (Wolf, 2006). With a total of about 14%, they are also slightly overrepresented among domestic violence victims calling the police for help (Ferwerda 2007). Policy makers within the Ministry of Justice immediately raised the question of whether special registration of 'ethnic origin' was required. The many hurdles of the concept 'ethnic origin' as a registration category emerged in a pilot study in two police districts. It resulted in unreliable data that led to negative advice with respect to the feasibility of registering ethnic origin (Willemsen 2007).

International context

International data on prevalence of domestic violence among minority women do not provide an unequivocal answer to the question of whether or not there is more violence among cultural minorities. Varying definitions of the category of (ethnic) minorities pose limitations for an international comparison (Sundaram et al. 2003; Garcia-Moreno et al. 2006).

In the United Kingdom, data are available with respect to fairly broad categories (distinguishing between 'white', 'black' and 'Asian' ethnicities). No significant differences in prevalence of domestic violence were reported between these groups (Walby and Allen 2004). In Germany a slightly higher prevalence of domestic violence against women of Turkish origin was reported (37% vs. 29% German women). Part of this difference is attributed by the researchers to the fact that women of Turkish origin tend to stay longer in violent relationships than women of German origin, whose divorce rate is generally higher (Schröttle et al. 2004). This finding is in line with US studies, indicating that, rather than culture or ethnicity, a complex of intersecting variables affect women's vulnerability to prolonged victimization of domestic violence, notably social isolation, residence status, and the availability of an independent income (Hampton et al. 2005; Richie et al. 2005; Malley-Morrison and Hines 2007; Grzywacz et al. 2009). Within Europe recent research indicates that the psycho-social impact of immigration is a major variable that is positively correlated to prevalence and severity of domestic violence of men against women (Echeburúa et al. 2009; Vatnar and Bjørkly 2010).

Spouse killing, honour killing and the role of 'culture' in the Netherlands

Of all spouse killings in the Netherlands between 1992 and 2006 (N=603), women were by far the majority of victims (79%). Without exception, all women were killed by a male partner. On average 33 women and seven men are killed annually by their intimate partner or ex-partner in the Netherlands (Nieuwbeerta & Leistra 2007: 66). Turkish and Moroccan minorities, and migrant women of other ethnic minorities, are slightly overrepresented among the victims. Of all female victims, 14% are Turkish or Moroccan (Liem et al. 2007: 26). How can this heightened risk of being killed by their spouse for these migrant women be explained? Against the backdrop of the growing number of non-lethal honour-based violence (usually of young

women/daughters),[6] it has been suggested that the number of honour-based killings could explain the increase.

Before looking at empirical data, the concepts of spouse killing and so-called honour-based killings need to be dissected. As illustrated in the opening vignette, these concepts are regularly conflated as synonyms as soon as the victim and/or perpetrator are of Turkish or Moroccan descent. The specific meanings of the concept of honour (of the women/girl and *ipse facto* of the family) vary widely (Brenninkmeijer et al. 2009; Van Eck 2001; Bakker 2005).[7] Having said that, the pivotal common element, norms regarding women's sexuality are constitutive of what is culturally defined as appropriate i.e. 'honourable' gender behaviour. Men (i.e., brothers, fathers, husbands) acquire masculine honour through 'protecting' a woman's reputation of chastity, and are responsible for controlling and limiting their sister's (or mother's, or cousin's) social behaviour or any other behaviour that could be interpreted as 'sexual'. Women acquire feminine honour when their behaviour is perceived as chaste. In practice, this translates into a wide range of rules and prohibitions governing women's social and sexual behaviour.[8] A

6 Based on reports from shelter staff and the police about women who are abused or under severe threat when they do not submit to traditional gender norms re. sexuality and partner choice, honour- based violence against young women of second generation immigrants seems to be increasing. Since the early 2000s, increasing efforts have been undertaken in the area of prevention and support of victims of honour-based violence, both for police, social work and shelter facilities. The Dutch Ministry of Justice created a special link on honour-related violence on its website on 'Security' and 'Prevention' in the Netherlands, providing information on all aspects of honour-based violence and where to find help or information: <http://www.veiligheidbegintbijvoorkomen.nl/onderwerpen/Agressie_geweld/Eergerelateerd_geweld/>
The principal author is a member of the expert committee and is preparing advice for the Prosecutor General's office on national guidelines for police and prosecutors regarding honour-based violence, to be expected in 2011.

7 In the Turkish-Kurdish community, a distinction is made between two kinds of honour: *sheref,* referring to the social reputation of a man in the community, and *namus*, referring to the chastity in the sexual behaviour of women as the basis of the husband's and the family's honour, which it is the responsibility of the husband or male family members to monitor and protect and to avenge when offended. According to some experts, *namus* is a more absolute category (one has or loses *namus),* whereas *sheref* is more relative, referring to social status and prestige. The husband's *namus* is offended if the wife (or daughter, sister) is the subject of public gossip because she might be *perceived* as independently sexually active (mainly outside marriage). In the Moroccan community, honour-based violence is less common and cultural norms regarding honour are more variable. The general Arabic concept of *heshma* is used as a common denominator for honour and shame-related issues. They touch upon the sexual honour of women (*hurma*) especially girls' chastity, and women's obedience generally (*sharaf*) (Brenninkmeijer et al. 2009, 19–21; Yerden, 2008 37–38). In virtually all Muslim cultures lesbian or gay activities are unacceptable (often criminalized) and considered an offence against honour.

8 For a wife, they range from a prohibition of any outdoor activity that is unsupervised by a male relative, that could involve encounters with unrelated men, to a prohibition of extra-

spouse killing qualifies as an honour-based killing if the motive for the killing is related to the woman's sexual behaviour perceived as unchaste. The killing of an abused wife, who had no other reason to separate than the wish to escape from her partner's violence, would therefore not qualify as a so-called honour-based killing. From this perspective, the number of so-called *honour killings of wives* is not increasing in the Netherlands. Of all 603 spouse killing cases between 1992 and 2006, *not one* case was actually an honour killing (Nieuwbeerta and Leistra 2007).

However, major ethnic minorities in the Netherlands are overrepresented among perpetrators of female spouse killing. A recent study, based on the analysis of psychiatric files of suspects of spouse killing, focused on differences in motivation of native Dutch perpetrators and those from the major minorities (Liem et al. 2007).[9] It was concluded that on the level of *situational characteristics*, the 'separation after violent abuse' was the most common feature of all spouse killings with no significant difference between the subgroups. On the level of *personal motivational characteristics* a cultural difference seemed to emerge, according to the researchers. 'Hurt pride/honour', referring to sadness and anger about the loss, notably the loss of control over the wife who left (or wanted to leave), and 'grief and shame' about the perceived loss of masculine honour were more often reported about Turks (77%) and Moroccans (59%), compared to 29% of the native Dutch perpetrators. Note however, that in none of these cases sexual honour as defined above had been compromised. It was the perpetrator's failed efforts to effectively control the wife and prevent her from leaving which, across subgroups, was experienced by the men as hurting their honour and pride. The second most frequently reported personal motive was 'fear of loss/abandonment'. This motive was mentioned by almost one third of the Dutch perpetrators (29%), compared to a small minority of Turkish (8%) and Moroccan (12%) perpetrators. In conclusion, the Turkish or Moroccan perpetrators' motives were ultimately categorized by the researchers as specifically 'culturally' motivated: 'referring to an interconnected set of norms and meanings that guide people's perspective on life', in contrast to only 1% of the cases of Dutch perpetrators (Liem et al. 2007: 41, 73, 82–84). The Dutch were pre-

marital sexual activity as violations of the wife's (and her husband's) honour. For a daughter or sister, it means a prohibition of pre-marital sexual or dating activity (up to a prohibition of any social activity that might involve unsupervised encounters with non-related men).

9 The study is based on analyses of 282 psychiatric reports on male perpetrators of spouse killing: 238 native Dutch, 26 of Turkish and 17 of Moroccan descent. Since the number of Turks and Moroccans are very small, the quantitative results need to be interpreted with caution since a shift of one or two respondents translates into suggestively large percentage shifts.

sented as predominantly guided by motives of a psychological nature when killing their wives.

This conclusion deserves scrutiny. Analytically speaking we can observe a selective and biased representation of how masculine honour permeates both Muslim and Western culture. On the one hand, it reflects the conflation indicated before, where any killing of a wife by someone with a Muslim background is labelled as honour-killing, without a deeper analysis of the specifics of the case. On the other hand, it also reflects a lack of understanding of how deeply ingrained masculine honour of men is in Western patriarchal culture. Without glossing over the differences in the way masculinity is defined across cultures with respect to the concept of honour, and the public interest that is attached to honour as a family-value, it is important to recognize commonalities in the way honour and masculinity are intertwined in any patriarchal culture in order to avoid the selective culturalisation of individual motivations for perpetrators from a Muslim background. As a flipside to the selective culturalisation of motives, a selective individualisation of motives of native Dutch perpetrators is taking place. The feelings of hurt pride and offended masculinity, as obvious manifestations of traditional Western gender norms where masculinity and control over a (female) partner are closely linked, are labelled as individual psychological characteristics in the case of the Dutch perpetrators, ignoring the cultural patriarchal nature of such a motive.

The question is why cultural values and traditions regarding masculine honour and pride, which inevitably affect individual psychological motives, are primarily and selectively attributed to Muslim perpetrators and not Dutch (Western) men. In doing so, Turkish and Moroccan perpetrators are constructed as cultural dopes, inevitably and unreflectively influenced by a collective mentality, whereas the native Dutch men who killed their (ex-)wife are portrayed as reflective individuals who make choices informed by their psychological make-up (Volpp 2000).[10] Implicitly Western traditional patriarchal norms – in this case about the masculine honour implied in being in control of one's wife – are mainstreamed as part of the psychology of the individual male, and are as such no longer identified as of a cultural origin.

These selective interpretive shifts cloud the similarity between Western and Muslim cultural concepts and individual experiences with respect to hurt male pride and honour. An oppositional and biased binary of cultural differ-

10 The generalizing conclusions in this study are also problematic from a methodological perspective: the limited sample size of the minority perpetrators (respectively 9% and 6% of the sample), hardly allows any meaningful quantitative comparison given the small numbers.

ence is constructed between Muslim and Western men, which simultaneously erases the heterogeneity that might be present within the subgroups.

Role of 'culture': the need for an intersectional perspective

The fact that lethal domestic violence occurs slightly more often among migrant minorities the question is how to explain this. Available research data are limited, and indicate a tendency to emphasize the role of different cultural values in family violence between ethnic groups (the cultural deviant or culturalist perspective). Some argue that this contributes to an entrenchment of existing stereotypes (Hampton, Carrillo and Kim 2005). More research is needed to understand the complexity of underlying factors that might contribute to the heightened vulnerability of migrant women that goes beyond their culture of origin as the defining variable. Due to profound methodological problems, it has been concluded that available data on the role of race or ethnicity in US-based research on family violence are limited in quality and generalizability (Malley-Morrison and Hines 2007). Important shortcomings persist related to sampling problems (representativeness, size), the conceptual lumping together of different ethnic or cultural categories and the lack of adequate attention for possible confounding of socio-economic status and other demographic variables with race or ethnicity as main errors. Furthermore, the use of a unified concept of 'culture' leads to a comparison that often ignores within-group variability (Raj and Silverman 2002).

Findings regarding over-representation of ethnic minorities need to be contextualized in order to address the complexity of experiences and to fully understand the role of 'culture' as well as 'gender' in domestic violence and homicides (Bograd 1999; Kasturirangan et al. 2004; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005; Thiara and Gill 2010). This requires going beyond simplifying and functionalist categorical concepts like culture and taking a closer look at how the lives of immigrant and cultural minority women and men are affected in the process of migration and acculturation. Research on immigration shows the need to understand the structural forces that shape the acculturation and assimilation process of transnational migrants (Batia and Ram 2009). Acculturation and assimilation are after all the result of an interactive dynamic relation between migrants and the host country (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2003). We have very limited systematic knowledge of how migration affects the perpetration or victimization of violence in intimate relationships. Race, gender, sexual orientation and class are core factors that ultimately contribute to

different sets of vulnerabilities. For individuals in migrant communities, usually in disadvantaged and marginalized positions vis-à-vis mainstream society, multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination and institutionalized violence may exacerbate abusive family relationships (Richie et al. 2005).

In the current European context, the increasing Islamophobic and hostile attitudes towards Muslim (im-)migrants is another crucial variable to take into consideration (FRA 2009; 2010). Demographic categories such as (im-)migrant group membership, ethnicity or religion are sometimes used as a proxy for culture because they allow easy categorization. These categories, often used to collect census data, refer to heterogeneous groups of people facing complex social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. To understand the impact of those dynamics requires looking more closely at the impact of existing hegemonic structures in different nation states, societies and cultures on violence in intimate relationships.

In the Netherlands, two political-cultural dynamics seem to feed particularly into the popularity of biased narratives on Muslim women as the ultimate victim of domestic violence: the growing anti-Islam and xenophobic attitudes, on the one hand, and the tendency to gender-neutralize violence against native Dutch women, on the other. In the aftermath of the particular share of fundamentalist-jihadist violence that the Netherlands has been confronted with,[11] the issues of VAW and Islam have become particularly intertwined. With the shift towards a growing criticism of multiculturalism in the Netherlands around the turn of the millennium, migrant women were increasingly considered in policy frames to be vulnerable and suffering from oppression, which resulted in a dominant policy discourse in which migrant women and their acculturation and integration were portrayed as an outright problem (Roggeband and Verloo 2007). It was implied that Turkish and Moroccan women in general were 'oppressed' by their husbands and fathers. This has become a recurring theme in public discourse and policy developments in the Netherlands, in fact amplifying problems of integration and acculturation (Entzinger 2003).[12] The selective attribution of women's oppression to Muslim cultures, in contrast to the 'emancipation' of Dutch women, seems to feed into the attribution of more and more severe violence to Muslim men

11 Although not a large-scale terrorist attack, the murder in 2004 of Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh, a well-known critic of abuse of women in Muslim communities, by a Dutch-Moroccan fundamentalist Muslim, exacerbated the Dutch discourse on violence of Muslim minorities.

12 Just as the difference between honour-based killing and spouse killing can become blurred all too easily as soon as it happens in ethnic minorities, the distinction between forced marriage and voluntary migration-marriage is at times erased. Exemplary is the response to the launching of a Muslim dating site: *'Muslims are now able to choose whom they are forced to marry*' (www.editienl.nl; May 14, 2009). No irony or sarcasm was intended.

who abuse their wives. Domestic violence has become a vehicle to stereotypically portray the gendered oppression that Muslim women suffer, unlike Dutch (native) women.

Concurring with the tendency to selectively culturalize domestic violence, the Dutch policy framing of domestic is increasingly gender-neutralized. Building on the data of the 1997 survey, as discussed before, and leaving aside initial analyses and research data emphasizing the gendered nature of domestic violence against women, the Dutch government produced in 2002 a white paper on domestic violence[13] as a gender neutral phenomenon. In 2007, the CEDAW Committee has strongly criticized this shift towards gender neutrality in its response to the Dutch CEDAW country report. It has urged the Dutch government to develop a more gender-sensitive approach (CEDAW 2007). The CEDAW commission explicitly voices its concern that Muslim women are portrayed as essentially oppressed and Muslim culture is constructed as inherently violent towards women, whereas native Dutch women are constructed as liberated. The net result is that Dutch culture is implicitly positioned as virtually non-violent towards women.

The underlying rhetorical strategy here is very similar to the one encountered in the research on spouse killing presented above. While domestic violence among minorities is predominantly attributed to 'culturally' oppressive traditions, domestic violence against native Dutch women has become the result of the (apparently widespread) psychological problems of the perpetrator or relational troubles between the partners. In more European countries a severing of domestic violence from a context of gender inequality is taking place (e.g. Krizsan et al. 2007; Hearn and McKie 2008). More research is needed to understand the paradoxical discursive and policy development of gender-neutralization and culturalisation of domestic violence in several countries, precisely at a time when VAW more generally is actually recognized in mainstream United Nations and European politics as a major public concern deserving attention (e.g. European Parliament Resolution 2010/C 285 E/07; 26 November 2009) .

Conclusion: deconstructing violence against women and culture in Fort Europe

For an adequate understanding of why the discourse on the cultural specificity of domestic violence among Muslim communities is persistent, it must be

13 *Privé geweld, publieke zaak* [Private violence, public concern].

situated in the wider context of anti-immigrant and especially anti-Muslim attitudes that increased across Europe over the last decade (EUMC 2006; FRA 2009). The dynamics addressed here are not unique to the Netherlands. They fit in with the nativist backlash against immigrants and refugees that flourishes in many industrialized countries in the global North. Even before the more recent anti-immigration tendencies took hold, Western liberal democracies never resolved the tensions which ethnocultural diversity evoked (Kymlicka 1998). After the fundamentalist attacks of Islamic jihadists in New York, and subsequent attacks in Europe (Madrid, London), tensions revived which resonated with deeply rooted anti-Oriental sentiments (Said 1995/1978). In the late 1990s, the two topics of immigration and VAW (mostly focusing on Muslim communities) have been connected in the debate on multiculturalism (Okin 1999; for a critique see Volpp 2000; Römkens 2002). Establishing the link between VAW and Muslim culture has been contested yet holds political currency. The US Government, for example, used it when calling for military interventions in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Repeatedly reference was made to VAW as a violation of women's human rights that imposed a 'solemn duty' (…) to bring freedom and liberty to the region", according to former US president Bush (Römkens 2005). In a shifting political landscape, where the continuation of the war against terrorist threats is increasingly questioned, the ongoing abuse of women and girls in Afghanistan in 2010 is hardly a subject of any public concern any longer in political debates on what the West should or could do in Afghanistan. Against a backdrop of anti-immigration sentiments 'Fort Europe' needs its building bricks, and there the topic of VAW, positioning Muslims as particularly violent still provides politically useful currency.

The need for an intersectional analysis illuminating the structural yet diverse nature of variables underlying VAW and girls across cultures has been convincingly argued and called for repeatedly. Theoretically, the concept of intersectionality provides an important attempt to cover this complexity. However, how the simultaneous and intersecting impact of all different forms of structural disempowerment varies within and between cultures is empirically still an under-researched domain. Ultimately, the goal is to understand differences within and between social and cultural groups without essentializing them.

From an international legal and political perspective, VAW is gaining more prominence on the European agenda as a fundamental human rights violation that is in no way culturally specific. A recent ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (Opuz v. Turkey)[14] underlined once again that do-

14 *Opuz v Turkey* (Appl. No. 33401/02) ECHR 9 June 2009.

mestic violence is a violation of women's rights that is not specific to any particular culture, and which requires effective state intervention with due diligence to protect women. Preparations to construct a more transnational legal basis for a concerted European effort to prevent VAW and to better protect victims are underway, both within the Council of Europe and in the European Commission.[15] When addressing VAW in a European context, it is more urgent than ever to take the multiple inequalities that women face into consideration. With anti-migration and xenophobic resentment growing across the EU, an improved understanding of the complex impact of cultural differences on VAW is necessary in order to get beyond culturalist stereotypes.

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15 The Council of Europe has launched a Committee that is currently in the process of preparing a Convention Against violence against women and domestic violence (CAHVIO), scheduled to finalize its work in 2011.
See:<http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/violence/CAHVIO_2009_1%20Terms%20of%20reference.pdf>. The European Commission commissioned an EU-wide comparative analysis of on legislation in all EU countries on violence against women, children and sexual identity-based violence, aiming to address the feasibility of harmonisation of legislation in this area. See Kelly, L., C. Hagemann-White, R. Römkens, Zwamborn, M. (forthcoming), Feasibility study to assess the possibilities, opportunities and needs to standardize national legislation on violence against women, violence against children and sexual-orientation-based violence. Brussels: EC Directorate of Justice, Freedom and Security.

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